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C O N F I D E N T I A L BUENOS AIRES 001179

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/30/2039

TAGS: PREL PGOV ECON PHUM SOCI AR

SUBJECT: ARGENTINA: VIOLENCE AMONG GOVERNMENT-SUPPORTED
PIQUETEROS?

REF: A. BUENOS AIRES 0794 AND PREVIOUS
B. BUENOS AIRES 1148

Classified By: DCM Tom Kelly for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Argentine media and opposition are questioning government financial support of a group that attacked the venue for an October 16 speech in Jujuy by Senator Gerardo Morales, leader of the Radical Party (UCR). Morales blames 40 members of the piquetero group Tupac Amaru for orchestrating the violent attack against him, which reportedly included breaking windows and throwing chairs and eggs. Tupac Amaru has grown in recent years, largely thanks to the government's financial support. While the attack against Senator Morales is not an isolated instance of intimidation tactics against politicians by piquetero groups (ref A), the assertion that they are armed and prepared to escalate their violence is causing some alarm. At Senator Morales' insistence, the Jujuy incident has sparked broader public discussion about the growing use of force by these groups and the need for greater controls over their funding. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The October 16 violent attack on the Professional Council of Economic Sciences in Jujuy resulted in broken windows, destroyed furniture, and other property damage. The attack was aimed at Radical Party President and Senator Gerardo Morales, who was at the location preparing to make a speech. Media coverage focused on Milagro Sala, the feisty 46-year-old founding leader of the Tupac Amaru movement based in Argentina's northwest province of Jujuy. Morales claims 40 Tupac Amaru members orchestrated the violent attack. During an October 21 Senate address, Morales rebuked the attack and accused Sala of being a "mafia leader who directs armed groups tied to drugs." Sala denies her group's involvement in the attack. (Note: During the 2007 presidential race, Sala supported Morales, who ran for vice-president on former Economy Minister Roberto Lavagna's ticket.)

Milagro Sala Defends Her Group

¶3. (SBU) The controversy prompted Sala to shed her previously low profile to denounce what she describes as attempts to defame her. Denying allegations that her group was armed, she asserted that Argentine politicians "cannot handle the fact that we are demonstrating that we can achieve public works without robbing the State of a single peso" while also providing thousands of jobs to group members. In solidarity with Sala, Kirchner supporter Luis D'Elia of the Land and Housing Federation joined members of Tupac Amaru and the violent Quebracho group to protest Morales' condemnation of Sala and her group on October 19. D'Elia, who is known to be violent (e.g., his infamous punch circulated via YouTube of a farm sector supporter in 2008), denied violence among piquetero groups, asserting that the only violent ones are

those that "create death squadrons" against the poor.

Allegations of Violence and Drugs

¶4. (SBU) While Sala denies the use of violence among her group and her group's participation in the attack, few local observers believe her. The attack's principal instigator, Graciela Lopez, belongs to Libertad (Freedom), one of the 24 organizations that comprise the social movement network Sala commands, according to paper-of-record "La Nacion." Senator Morales claims that there are as many as 28 legal cases pending against Tupac Amaru for various causes including robbery, illegal possession of firearms, destruction of property, and defying authority. Morales charges that over the past two years Tupac Amaru supporters have attacked the newspaper of a political rival to the Kirchners, entered at least three police commissaries to free group members, burned the entrance to the Government House, and camped out for ten days in one of the minister's offices. While describing Sala as the one "who governs Jujuy today," Morales also accuses Sala of illegal enrichment (owning seven cars and a luxurious weekend house) and of being tied to drug trafficking. Leading daily "Clarín" quotes one magistrate asserting that the judges know that they do not have support to go against Sala and that the police will not "move a finger" because "to go against her has terrible costs."

Constructing an Empire Thanks to Kirchner Support

¶5. (SBU) Support from President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (CFK) and her husband, former President Nestor

Kirchner (NK), has been key to the group's growth in recent years. Tupac Amaru is described by press reports as a parallel state. The group's 70,000 members, located primarily in Jujuy but also in 16 other provinces, receive housing, jobs, healthcare, education, and legal assistance. Reports vary widely on how much government funding goes to Sala's organization, ranging from \$100 to \$200 million annually channeled through the Ministries of Planning, Labor, and Social Development.

¶6. (SBU) Sala estimates that thanks to national government backing, the group has built 3,000 houses and five factories with 3,500 jobs. She noted that most Tupac members labor in construction and textiles, but added that the group also boasts over 250 teachers and 40 healthcare workers among its cooperatives. Sala equated one of her neighborhoods to a country club, with houses, factories, assistance centers, and even a heated pool.

Calls for Transparency on Federal Support

¶7. (SBU) The violent attack on Morales led ruling party and opposition senators to call on the GOA to account for GOA funds provided to Jujuy piquetero groups. In addition, the Senate also called for an investigation of allegations that Tupac Amaru was armed.

Casa Rosada's Response

¶8. (SBU) CFK and NK have remained silent regarding the incident, leaving Cabinet Chief Aníbal Fernández and Interior Minister Florencio Randazzo to serve as the Casa Rosada's spokespersons. Three days after the incident, Fernández publicly condemned the attack as an "embarrassment" and the delay was not overlooked by the press. Several days later, Randazzo denied the government's support of armed piquetero groups, saying "the government would never finance a social organization to arm people." While he condemned the attack, he accused some political leaders of "overreacting" for political benefits.

¶19. (SBU) The adopted child of middle-class parents, Milagro Sala, also known as the "the Governor," hails from the indigenous group Coya. According to press reports, after learning that she was adopted, Sala fled her family's home at the age of 15 to engage in a life of drugs and crime on the streets, eventually serving nine months in jail for robbery. After her release, Sala began to participate in the state workers' union (ATE) in the late 1980s, later joining the unrecognized labor confederation the Argentine Workers Central (CTA), which she used as a platform to launch her work in neighborhoods forgotten by "traditional politics," and in 1998 formed Tupac Amaru.

¶10. (SBU) Despite the Kirchners' support, Sala asserts that she is neither pro nor anti-Kirchner. Referring to all politicians as the same, she rejects higher political office, describing politics as "dirty" and asserting that "it has cost us so much to achieve what we have that it would be a crime to throw it away by running for office."

Comment

¶11. (C) The attack against Senator Morales is not an isolated instance of the use of force by piquetero leaders and their groups (ref A). Just four days after the Jujuy incident, 300 activists of the movement Atahualpa stormed Buenos Aires province coastal city Mar del Plata's municipality demanding their inclusion in the Kirchners' new job creation plan. While Argentines have long been accustomed to violence from protestors -- in the form of rock and egg throwing, and even punches in the case of D'Elia -- the assertion that there are armed piquetero groups is relatively uncommon. As a result of Senator Morales' persistence, the Jujuy incident seems to have sparked a broader discussion on both sides of the political spectrum and in the public realm about the growing use of force by these groups and the need for greater controls over their funding. Indeed, media coverage linked the Jujuy incident with the student protest during the Ambassador's visit to Mendoza the day before (ref B) as signs of a trend in the use of force among social activist movements.

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